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ABSTRACT

School districts considering a mentoring program need to consider four things: (1) the reasons for a teacher mentor program; (2) how to start such a program; (3) administrative support needed for a successful program; and (4) pitfalls to avoid. The reasons for having a mentor program are that it benefits the new teacher, the mentor, and the school. The new teacher's opportunities to exchange views with an experienced teacher is a distinct benefit to him/her. The mentor benefits also, however, because of the opportunity to share views, experiences, and strategies. The improved teaching that usually results is an asset to the school. Starting a program involves six stages: establishing a rationale, setting criteria for the selection of mentors, defining roles, inviting the mentors, training the mentors, and evaluating the program. To be successful, the program must have administrative support from the board of education, the superintendent, the central office staff, the teacher union, and the principal. As with any new program, anticipating problems can help to avoid them. Some pitfalls are: overdependence on the part of the protege, ego problems on the part of the mentor, and the evaluation dilemna arising from the mentor's dual role of confidant and evaluator. Mentorship programs promote professionalism by providing continuous staff development during the first year of teaching. (AMH)

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Developing an Effective Teacher Mentor Program

Mel P. Heller, Nancy W. Sindelar

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by
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Why Have a Teacher Mentor Program?

The term *mentor* has its origin in Homer's *Odyssey*, when Odysseus entrusted the education of his son, Telemachus, to a wise and learned man named Mentor. Since then, it has had a long and distinguished history.

Mentoring is simply the advice from a respected, experienced person provided to someone who needs help. Informal mentorship exists whenever one person explains to another the how or the why of something. Formal mentorship occurs as an organized, systematic relationship of providing and receiving assistance and insight. The provider is the mentor; the recipient is the protégé. Both informal and formal mentorship take place in business, medicine, law, and other professions.

In education the main focus of the mentor-protégé relationship is experiential learning. Mentors are seasoned, experienced teachers who act as teachers, guides, counselors, role models, and friends to new teachers. This relationship results in benefits for the new teacher, the mentor, and for the school organization. The new teacher or protégé receives knowledge, skills, support, and inspiration, while the mentor derives satisfaction, professional fulfillment, loyalty, and prestige. As a result of the mentoring relationship, the school organization achieves increased productivity, more effective instruction, and reduced turnover, because the mentorship has provided a systematic induction into the organization.

Benefits for the New Teacher

Research indicates that beginning teachers want to achieve professional autonomy and status equality with their colleagues (Lortie 1975), but that 92% do not seek help from colleagues except indirectly by swapping stories about personal experiences (Glidewell et al. 1983). This method of experience transfer not only hides novices' weaknesses but also prevents them from obtaining help with problems. Gray and Gray (1985) assert that "more than experience swapping is needed: a sense of community must be established, consisting of interdependence, shared concerns, a sense of common fate, and a sense that others stand by when one is under stress or uncertainty about what to do" (p. 39).

A study of 602 first-year teachers in New York City (Sacks and Bradley 1985) found that beginning teachers look to mentors for moral support, guidance, and feedback (24%); discipline and management skills (20%); curriculum and lesson planning (18%); school routines and scheduling (15%); motivation techniques (6%); and individualized instruction (2%). Studies of successful mentor programs indicate that mentors provide assistance and support in all these areas, which are critical to the professional success and personal well-being of new teachers.

For the protégé to benefit from the relationship, the mentor must be available, approachable, and receptive (Egan 1986). Although the mentor's views may carry more weight than those held by the protégé, the protégé's ideas, questions, attitudes, and style should influence the mentor's advice and direction. As the protégé grows in competence and confidence, decision making becomes increasingly more collaborative. The two become a team and must be able to share ideas openly. The very fact that the novice is afforded regular, ongoing opportunities to express views to a seasoned performer is a distinct benefit for the new teacher.

Benefits for the Mentor

While mentor relationships offer a variety of benefits to the protégé, there also are benefits for the mentor. By explaining such things as school handbooks, rules, traditions, and expectations, the mentor has the satisfaction that comes from exercising leadership and transferring important information to another. Additionally, the opportunity to help shape the professional growth of a protégé by sharing instructional strategies and insights is challenging and rewarding. Answering questions, making suggestions, and demonstrating skills involves the mentor in a process of self-examination and introspection about the art and science of teaching. The questions and concerns of the protégé require that the mentor be well prepared in instructional, management, and leadership roles.

Also, the protégé can share with the mentor new content and teaching strategies. Mentors may be surprised by how much the protégé knows about subject matter and methodology, and a healthy competition can result if the mentor is open to suggestions from the protégé.

Ultimately, the protégé can be a source of knowledge and inspiration for the mentor. They can learn from each other in a mutually supportive environment. Once paired with a protégé, the mentor has a ready, critical ear in a colleague who both receives and shares in the development of professional expertise.

Benefits for the School

The school also benefits greatly from mentorship activities. The opportunity for teachers to help each other to be better teachers is an obvious asset. Another benefit is that new personnel are inducted into the positive norms of the organization. Research and experience show that a new teacher will find a mentor of some kind; however, it is better to have a good mentor program in place to promote and nurture excellent teaching, good classroom management, adherence to school rules and regulations, and positive attitudes. In addition,

there is a certain esprit de corps that develops from an effective mentor program. This spirit can be contagious and foster innovation throughout the school.

Networking is another benefit of mentorship to the organization. Networking involves contacts between two or more people in which each plays the role of mentor and protégé at different times and to different degrees (Haring-Hidore 1987). Mentors can meet and share insights about their work, and protégés can share their experiences. The isolation of teaching is broken down; and as the mentoring program progresses, this networking can lead to an ever-expanding pool of good ideas.

Improved instruction is the ultimate goal of a mentoring program. When the community becomes aware of how teachers help each other to become better teachers, it has a concrete example of how the school is working to improve; and community support usually will be forthcoming.

How to Start a Program

The first stage in developing a teacher mentor program is to establish a rationale for the program. In addition to the benefits outlined in the last chapter, a needs assessment should be conducted to determine the specific needs of new teachers in a school or district. These needs, then, become the basis or rationale for the program.

The second stage is to establish criteria for the selection of mentors and to define their roles. A committee composed of faculty and administrators is a good structure for determining the roles to be played by the mentors. Also, new teachers should have input, because their needs will strongly influence the nature of the program. Once the mentors have been selected, they, too, will have additional suggestions for the program.

Mentor roles might include the following:

- to increase the protégé's instructional competence;
- to increase the protégé's self-confidence;
- to be a resource to the protégé in the areas of discipline, classroom management, curriculum, and lesson planning;
- to be a resource to the protégé in the areas of school policy, procedures, and routines; and
- to be a friend.

Once the roles are defined, the duration of the mentorship period must be determined. Mentors will want to know the extent of their commitment. While informal mentorships may continue for a number of years, the formal mentor period usually extends for one academic year.

Selecting the Mentors

Once a clear rationale has been established, the mentors and protégés need to be selected. The protégés, of course, will be the new teachers hired by the district. Criteria for the selection of mentors should include the following:

1. *Mentors should be excellent teachers.* Mentors should be teachers who have been judged by their supervisors, based on objective criteria, to have the ability to plan and implement organized, academically focused lessons. They should have excellent classroom-management skills and use disciplinary methods that are consistent with school policy. They should create a learning climate that cultivates student achievement and respect for learning and for the teacher. Finally, they should be introspective about their own teaching and be able to articulate the reasons for the instructional decisions they make. From their experiences they should know what to attend to and what to ignore. Instructional decisions, such as when to stay with a topic and when to move on, should be based on teaching context and the needs of students.

2. *Mentors should be team players.* Mentors should have a positive attitude toward the school and the persons who make up the school community. While not ignoring problems, mentors should support the system with an attitude of looking at the cup as half full instead of half empty.

3. *Mentors should match the subject area and grade level of their protégés.* It is important that the mentor and protégé match with regard to subject area and grade level be as close as possible. Ideally, the protégé second-grade teacher should be matched with a mentor who is a second-grade teacher; a new high school English teacher hired to teach multiple sections of Creative Writing and Speech should be paired with a mentor with expertise in these subject areas. Also, scheduling of common preparation periods and lunch periods facilitates communication in the mentoring relationship.

Other characteristics of good mentors are that they are people-oriented and even-tempered; they respect and like their subordinates

and engender trust and respect in others (Clawson 1979). Alleman (1982) found successful mentors to be confident, secure, flexible, altruistic, warm and caring, and sensitive to the needs of protégés.

Once individuals with these characteristics have been identified, the principal or superintendent invites them to become mentors. The invitation should communicate that those invited are viewed as effective teachers, whose experience and skills will be most helpful in working with new teachers in the school. While potential mentors should feel honored to be invited, they should not be obligated to accept the assignment. A sample mentor invitation letter is shown below.

Sample Invitation to a Prospective Mentor

Dear _____,

The district will be hiring a number of new teachers next year. In order to introduce them to school routines and procedures and help them to become more effective instructors, we would like to assign a mentor to each new teacher. Because you are an excellent teacher and have made many valuable contributions to the district over the years, I am inviting you to become a participant in the Teacher Mentor Program.

As a mentor, you will be matched with a new teacher and asked to help him or her during their first year. You will receive mentor training during a one-day workshop on (date) . At that time you will learn more about the roles and responsibilities of mentorship.

Please let me know if you are able to accept this invitation to become a mentor.

Sincerely,

_____

Principal

Training the Mentors

Once the mentors have been selected and their general roles have been defined, a training component is necessary to help the mentors understand the needs of beginning teachers. A one-day training session of four to five hours should be scheduled before the beginning of the academic year.

A beginning activity might be to ask the mentors to recall an important mentor in their own lives and the things that person did which contributed to their professional development. The training should include an overview of the characteristics of a novice teacher, a discussion of mentor roles and responsibilities as defined by the district, guidelines for classroom visitations between mentors and protégés, a review of research on effective instruction (teacher planning, clarity of instruction, questioning strategies, teacher feedback, classroom management, instructional organization, and student motivation), a review of the stages of the mentor relationship and how long that relationship will last, and a clarification of the evaluation role of the mentor.

Mentors should be provided with a simple mentoring handbook, which is reviewed during training and serves as a guide for the duration of the mentor period. The handbook might include the following topics:

- Research base for mentoring,
- Basic purposes of the mentor program,
- Suggested roles for the mentor,
- Guidelines for class visits,
- Summary of effective schools research,
- Summary of discipline and due process procedures, and
- Summary of the attendance policy.

After the training session, the mentors and new teachers can be introduced at a luncheon or other social setting, which is scheduled prior to the first day of school.

Evaluating the Program

As with any new program, the teacher mentor program should be closely monitored during its first year. This should begin with a formal written evaluation of the training session and suggestions for topics the mentors might want covered in a follow-up session later in the year.

There also should be formal evaluations by mentors at the end of the first quarter and mid-year in the program. The first-quarter evaluation should focus on the mentors' success in meeting the established goals, including ways that administrators could be more helpful in enabling the mentors and protégés to achieve those goals. The mid-year evaluation should include a trouble-shooting session at which the mentors discuss their roles and the ways by which they can improve their mentoring responsibilities.

At the end of the year, the program should be evaluated by both mentors and protégés. Protégés should be asked how successful the program was in helping them adjust to school routines and procedures, improve their teaching, and feel "at home" in the district. The mentors should evaluate the program using these same criteria and also whether being a mentor helped them to be more introspective about their own teaching.

At the end of the year, the school district should evaluate the program in terms of the costs and benefits. Among the costs to consider are stipends paid to mentors and the trainer for the training session, preparation of training manuals and other printed materials, and food service for the training luncheon and other meetings. Benefits can be assessed through the mid-year and end-of-the-year evaluations by mentors and protégés.

Administrative Support for a Successful Teacher Mentor Program

Administrative support is crucial for the success of a mentorship program. Matching mentors and protégés, scheduling contact time, and managing and evaluating the program all require administrative support. This support must originate with the school board and be reinforced at every level in the administrative hierarchy. Following is a brief discussion of the levels of administrative support needed for a successful program.

Board of Education. Beyond authorizing the teacher mentor program, the school board must provide the resources necessary for success, including personnel, time, materials, and some funding. The board should hold the administration accountable for structuring, monitoring, and evaluating the program and should request periodic reports on the progress and problems of the program.

Superintendent. The superintendent's involvement in the teacher mentor program will depend on day-to-day priorities. Except in very small school districts, the superintendent is usually physically removed from the daily operations in individual school buildings. However, this physical distance does not preclude being well informed, allocating resources, and giving the program a high profile. It is important for the superintendent to communicate in word and deed that the mentor program is an essential part of the district's staff-development effort devoted to the induction of new teachers. The superintendent also must work with the board to ensure that the program is adequately funded.

Central Office Staff. Other than the superintendent, the central office staff probably will not be directly involved in the teacher mentor program. However, the central office can provide valuable services in the areas of mentor training, research on effective teaching, and curriculum resources. This staff also can foster support by publicizing and interpreting the program to the community.

Teacher Union. Obviously, the teacher union has a role in the teacher mentor program because it involves issues in the union contract. Hours of work, class size, planning time, duty-free lunch periods, and remuneration are but a few of the issues that must be negotiated. Rather than analyze all the potential grievance issues that might arise, suffice it to say that the union must be involved at the initial stages of organizing the program. Since professionalism is at the heart of a mentor program, union representatives should be reasonable about the conditions needed to implement the program.

Principal. The principal, of course, is a key figure in the planning and implementation of a teacher mentor program. The principal will be involved in the recruitment and selection of mentors, the assignment of mentors to protégés, scheduling, and other monitoring activities. The principal must keep the board and superintendent apprised of progress and must communicate regularly with the mentors and protégés.

Even though school schedules are complex, the principal needs flexibility in order to give mentors and protégés time together to observe one another's classes or to discuss curricular matters. This might mean arranging for the mentor and protégé to have classrooms in close proximity, having the same prep and lunch periods, or sharing office space.

Other ways the principal can help to ensure the success of the program include being visible and soliciting feedback. The visibility of the principal during the mentor training sessions and throughout the program indicates positive support. Soliciting systematic feedback provides the principal with information about what is working and what is not. If a particular mentor relationship is not working, personnel changes can be made, or counseling may be necessary.

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Pitfalls to Avoid in Teacher Mentor Programs

As in any new program, problems can arise unexpectedly in a teacher mentor program. Anticipating such problems can help to avoid them. Common problems include the protégé becoming too dependent on the mentor, ego factors affecting professional decisions, mismatching of the mentor and the protégé, betraying confidences, and failing to clarify the evaluative role of the mentor.

Dependency. The very nature of the mentoring relationship assumes some degree of dependency by the protégé. But the degree is not static; it should change to less dependency as the program progresses. There is no specific timeline for the move from dependency to independence, but some benchmarks should be established in the initial planning stages for purposes of formalizing progress. However, these benchmarks cannot be too rigid. For example, if it is decided at the outset that the protégé will have mastered inductive teaching skills by the end of the second marking period and the protégé demonstrates mastery by the end of the first marking period, the preset benchmark is meaningless and should be put aside. The mentorship program needs structure, but common sense should prevail.

The phases of the mentor/protégé relationship have been identified by Kram (1983) as: 1) initiation, when the relationship is established; 2) cultivation, when the relationship becomes more comprehensive; 3) separation, when it is necessary for the relationship to change; and 4) redefinition, when the relationship has established a new form or

the relationship terminates. Kram found that mentor relationships vary in duration but generally pass through these four "predictable, yet not entirely distinct phases." Phillips (1977) suggests a six-stage continuum: initiation, sparkle (presenting oneself in the best light), development, disillusionment, parting, and transformation. Gehrke and Kay (1984) found that true mentor/protégé relationships are developmental. The relationship grows to be more professional and personal. Then the relationship ends, usually positively, with the protégé benefiting from the knowledge, experience, and advice provided by the mentor.

Ego Problems. Sometimes, the mentor may not be able to "let go" as the protégé become less and less dependent. Having someone dependent on you is often ego-enhancing; but when the protégé is especially able, he or she may challenge the mentor's advice, thus resulting in serious ego problems for both parties involved.

The Evaluation Dilemma. The mentor's role as both confidant and/or evaluator presents a dilemma. Misunderstanding and conflict can arise when a mentor develops a close working relationship with a protégé but is also expected to be the official evaluator. As the district develops its rationale for the program, it must give careful consideration as to whether the mentor will have a formal role in the evaluation of new teachers. If mentors are to have a role in formal evaluation, then the procedures as established by school policy and the union contract must be observed.

This issue must be addressed in the mentor training session, and the training handbook should make very clear the distinction between mentor and evaluator roles.

Our analysis of effective teacher mentor programs reveals that new teachers and administrators are receptive to mentor evaluation. However, many mentors and teacher unions prefer to leave formal evaluation to the principal.

Trust. Successful teacher mentor programs nurture a relationship in which both parties work together to improve their work as educa-

tors. For the mentor and the protégé to relate effectively requires a high level of trust. And because the relationship puts the mentor in the role of confidant, it is very important that confidences are respected by both parties.

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Conclusion

With thoughtful and careful planning, an effective teacher mentor program can be implemented following the steps outlined in this fastback. Central to success are the competence and commitment of the mentors, protégés, and administrators and a school climate that is conducive to sharing and learning together.

A teacher mentor program can be implemented without a lot of extra funding. The success of the program does not depend on money; it depends on an attitude of professionalism. In some places, such as in Connecticut and Indiana, the mentor program is state-funded; and the mentor receives an additional stipend for services performed. Certainly, additional dollars are appreciated, but more important in our view are the personal and professional rewards that come from the mentor relationship.

Mentorship programs not only promote professionalism, they almost guarantee it by providing continuous staff development during that critical first year of teaching when beginning teachers face new challenges every day. Teacher mentor programs can play a vital role in the current efforts to improve our schools.

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